

IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as follows:

Claim 1 (Currently Amended): A community service offering apparatus for exchanging information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network, the apparatus comprising:

virtual space information storing means for storing, in advance, virtual space information ~~about specifying~~ a plurality of types of virtual spaces to be offered for selection;

virtual space offering means for allowing a first user to select ~~any one~~ of said virtual spaces ~~and for offering the selected virtual space as~~ a user-specific virtual space leased or owned by said first user ~~regarded as a privileged user~~; and

charge controlling means for charging said ~~privileged first~~ user ~~who owns said user-specific virtual space~~ a fee ~~corresponding to a~~ based on the specified type of said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 2 (Currently Amended): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said charge controlling means does not charge fees on ~~these~~ users other than said ~~privileged first~~ user who ~~simply~~ gain access to said user-specific virtual space ~~of said privileged user~~.

Claim 3 (Currently Amended): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein

said virtual space information specifies a maximum number of further users who can gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space, and

said charge controlling means charges said ~~privileged-first~~ user a fee ~~in proportion to the based on the specified maximum~~ number of ~~other-further~~ users who ~~may-can~~ gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 4 (Currently Amended): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein said charge controlling means charges said ~~privileged-first~~ user a fee in proportion to the amount of data constituting a real storage area allocated to said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 5 (Currently Amended): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein

said virtual space information specifies a maximum number of objects that can be allocated to said user-specific virtual space, and

said charge controlling means charges said ~~privileged-first~~ user ~~either a fee in proportion to the based on the specified maximum~~ number of objects that ~~may-can~~ be allocated to said user-specific virtual space ~~or a fee in accordance with types of said objects, in addition to said fee corresponding to said type of said user-specific virtual space.~~

Claim 6 (Currently Amended): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising:

access managing means for managing access to said user-specific virtual space,

wherein, if users other than said ~~privileged-first~~ user attempt to gain access to said user-specific virtual space, then said access managing means determines whether ~~or not~~ to permit said access based on a virtual space identification code for identifying said user-

specific virtual space and on a password, both said virtual space identification code and said password being input by the access-attempting users.

Claim 7 (Currently Amended): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, further comprising:

object managing means for managing objects located where desired in said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 8 (Currently Amended): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 7, wherein said object managing means manages objects located as designated by those users other than said ~~privileged~~ first user who gain access to said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 9 (Withdrawn): A community service offering method for exchanging information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network, the method comprising the steps of:

allowing a user to select any one of a plurality of virtual spaces provided in advance;
offering the selected virtual space as a user-specific virtual space owned by said user regarded as a privileged user; and

charging said privileged user who owns said user-specific virtual space a fee corresponding to a type of said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 10 (Withdrawn): A community service offering method according to claim 9, wherein fees are not charged on those users other than said privileged user who simply gain access to said user-specific virtual space of said privileged user in said charging step.

Claim 11 (Withdrawn): A community service offering method according to claim 9, wherein said privileged user is charged a fee in proportion to the number of other users who may gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space in said charging step.

Claim 12 (Withdrawn): A community service offering method according to claim 9, wherein said privileged user is charged a fee in proportion to the amount of data constituting a real storage area allocated to said user-specific virtual space in said charging step.

Claim 13 (Withdrawn): A community service offering method according to claim 9, wherein said privileged user is charged either a fee in proportion to the number of objects that may be allocated to said user-specific virtual space or a fee in accordance with types of said objects, in addition to said fee corresponding to said type of said user-specific virtual space, in said charging step.

Claim 14 (Withdrawn): A community service offering method according to claim 9, further comprising the step of managing access to said user-specific virtual space, wherein, if users other than said privileged user attempt to gain access to said user-specific virtual space, then, in said access managing step, it is determined whether or not to permit said access based on a virtual space identification code for identifying said user-specific virtual space and on a password, both said virtual space identification code and said password being input by the access-attempting users.

Claim 15 (Withdrawn): A community service offering method according to claim 9, further comprising the step of managing objects located where desired in said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 16 (Withdrawn): A community service offering method according to claim 15, wherein objects located as designated by those users other than said privileged user who gain access to said user-specific virtual space are managed in said object managing step.

Claim 17 (Withdrawn): A program storage medium which stores a program for causing a community service offering apparatus exchanging information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network, to execute the steps of:

allowing a user to select any one of a plurality of virtual spaces provided in advance;
offering the selected virtual space as a user-specific virtual space owned by said user regarded as a privileged user; and

charging said privileged user who owns said user-specific virtual space a fee corresponding to a type of said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 18 (Withdrawn): A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein fees are not charged on those users other than said privileged user who simply gain access to said user-specific virtual space of said privileged user in said charging step.

Claim 19 (Withdrawn): A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said privileged user is charged a fee in proportion to the number of other users who may gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space in said charging step.

Claim 20 (Withdrawn): A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said privileged user is charged a fee in proportion to the amount of data constituting a real storage area allocated to said user-specific virtual space in said charging step.

Claim 21 (Withdrawn): A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said privileged user is charged either a fee in proportion to the number of objects that may be allocated to said user-specific virtual space or a fee in accordance with types of said objects, in addition to said fee corresponding to said type of said user-specific virtual space, in said charging step.

Claim 22 (Withdrawn): A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said program further comprises the step of managing access to said user-specific virtual space, wherein, if users other than said privileged user attempt to gain access to said user-specific virtual space, then, in said access managing step, it is determined whether or not to permit said access based on a virtual space identification code for identifying said user-specific virtual space and on a password, both said virtual space identification code and said password being input by the access-attempting users.

Claim 23 (Withdrawn): A program storage medium according to claim 17, wherein said program further comprises the step of managing objects located where desired in said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 24 (Withdrawn): A program storage medium according to claim 23, wherein objects located as designated by those users other than said privileged user who gain access to said user-specific virtual space are managed in said object managing step.

Claim 25 (Currently Amended): A community system for allowing a community service offering apparatus to exchange information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network,

wherein:

said community service offering apparatus comprises:

virtual space information storing means for storing, in advance, information ~~about~~ specifying a plurality of types of virtual spaces to be offered for selection;

virtual space offering means for allowing a first user to select ~~any one~~ of said virtual spaces and ~~for offering the selected virtual space as~~ a user-specific virtual space leased or owned by said first user ~~regarded as a privileged user;~~ and

charge controlling means for charging said ~~privileged first~~ user ~~who owns said user-specific virtual space~~ a fee ~~corresponding to a~~ based on the specified type of said user-specific virtual space;

~~while not charging fees~~ are not charged on ~~those~~ users other than said ~~privileged first~~ user who simply gain access to said user-specific virtual space ~~of said privileged user;~~ and

~~wherein~~ each of said user terminals comprises displaying means for displaying said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 26 (New): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 1, wherein

said virtual space information specifies limited types of objects that can be allocated to said user-specific virtual space, and

said charge controlling means charges said privileged user a fee in accordance with the specified limited types of said objects that can be allocated to said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 27 (New): A community service offering apparatus configured to exchange information with a plurality of user terminals connected by a network, the apparatus comprising:

memory configured to store, in advance, virtual space information specifying a plurality of types of virtual spaces to be offered for selection;

a processor configured to allow a first user to select one of said virtual spaces as a user-specific virtual space leased or owned by said first user and configured to charge said first user a fee based on the specified type of said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 28 (New): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 27, wherein

said virtual space information further specifies a maximum number of other users who can gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space, and

said fee is further based on the specified maximum number of other users who can gain access simultaneously to said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 29 (New): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 27, wherein

said virtual space information further specifies a maximum number of objects that can be allocated to said user-specific virtual space, and

said fee is further based on the specified maximum number of objects that can be allocated to said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 30 (New): A community service offering apparatus according to claim 27,
wherein

said virtual space information further specifies limited types of objects that can be
allocated to said user-specific virtual space, and

said fee is further based on the specified limited types of said objects that can be
allocated to said user-specific virtual space.

Claim 31 (New): A computer readable carrier including program instructions that
cause a computer to implement a method of exchanging information with a plurality of user
terminals connected by a network, the method comprising:

storing, in advance, virtual space information specifying a plurality of types of virtual
spaces to be offered for selection;

allowing a first user to select one of said virtual spaces as a user-specific virtual space
leased or owned by said first user; and

charging said first user a fee based on the specified type of said user-specific virtual
space.